

The President's Daily Brief

April 21, 1975

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LATE ITEM

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South Vietnam

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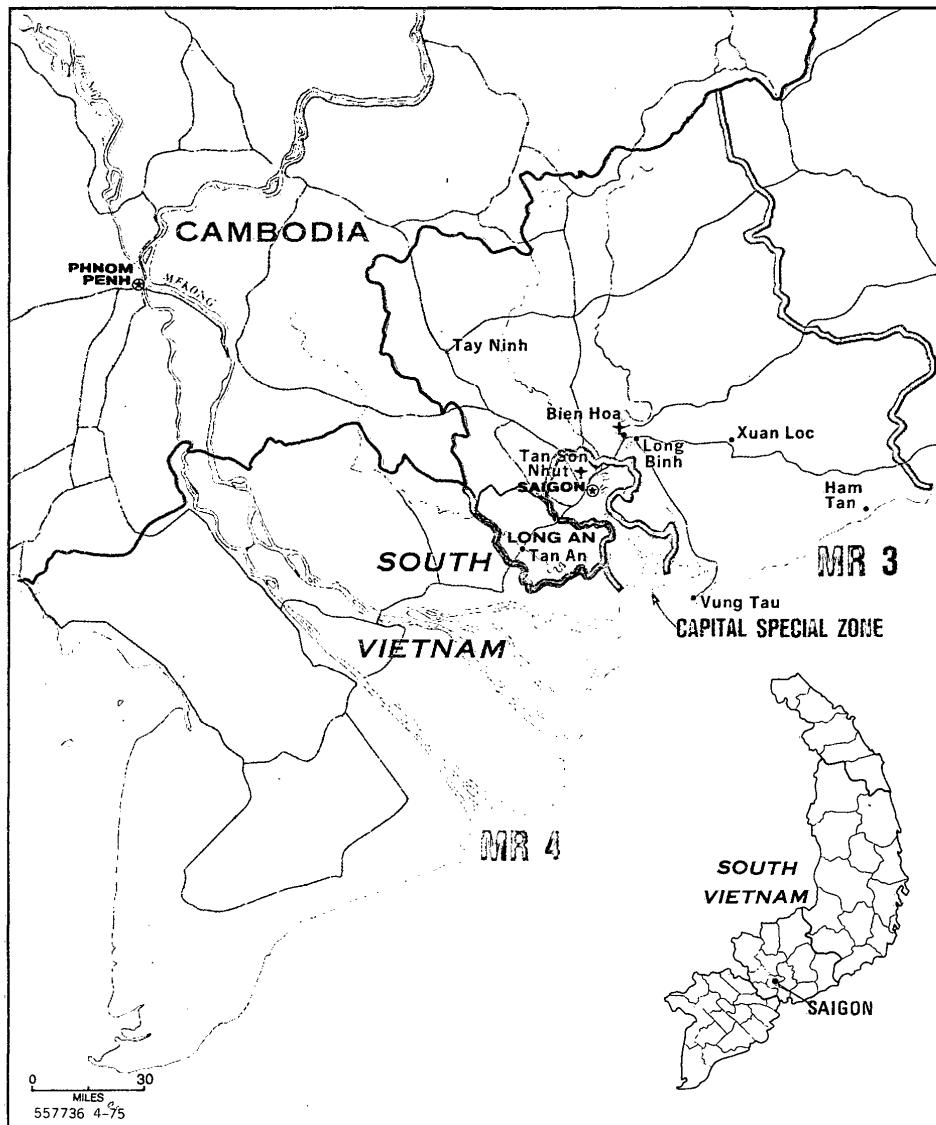
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VIETNAM

The North Vietnamese have rapidly brought several corps command headquarters south to direct the assault on Saigon. Two major commands from North Vietnam and the Hue - Da Nang area and the senior headquarters for the Central Highlands have joined one other corps command near Saigon to coordinate the attacks of some 17 divisions along the three major approaches to the capital--from the east, the north, and the south-west.

The defenders of Tan An, southwest of Saigon, have been pinned down while the communists send additional forces around them to new positions closer to the capital. The same has happened to the east, at Xuan Loc, which was abandoned by South Vietnamese troops today. North Vietnamese regiments that have bypassed Xuan Loc have driven toward Bien Hoa city.

Bien Hoa's main defense units--two brigades of marines who escaped from Da Nang--are newly regrouped and have poor discipline. They are not expected to stand and fight. The nearby Long Binh supply depot contains about 60 percent of all government munitions. The loss of Bien Hoa city, and the air base and supply depot would likely lead to the rapid collapse of other government forces.

To the northwest, remaining South Vietnamese 25th Division battalions have been pulled out of Tay Ninh city to blocking positions closer to Saigon, but the North Vietnamese 9th Division is swinging around the southern flank of the 25th to threaten Saigon's western perimeter. Southwest of the capital, the North Vietnamese have moved additional forces up from the delta to challenge the main defenses of Long An Province. Other communist regiments are approaching the southwestern outskirts of Saigon.

The communists are also moving five sapper regiments into the Saigon area to disrupt government control, terrorize the population, and guide North Vietnamese regulars into the metropolitan area.

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Saigon no longer has any reserve forces available to help defend the city. The Joint General Staff does not consider it practical to attempt to bring any units that are deep in the delta closer to Saigon.

Communist forces have taken Phan Thiet and Ham Tan and are continuing their drive down the coast toward Vung Tau. They will probably capture the lightly defended port within a few days.

* * *

The communists appear to be ruling out any consideration of a genuine negotiated settlement of the conflict. At a press conference in Saigon Saturday, the Viet Cong's spokesman carefully avoided mention of negotiations with the present government or even a reconstituted one such as they had been demanding. Instead, he reiterated the Viet Cong's position of March 21 which called for the overthrow of Thieu and the immediate suspension of all US support as the only two preconditions which could bring about a "rapid settlement."

An equally tough line reportedly emerged [redacted]

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[redacted] the "whole thing" would be finished in a short time and that the communists would not agree to enter into negotiations, nor would they join any tripartite coalition government. [redacted]

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[redacted] the issue of US aid had become "academic," since victory would be achieved before the South Vietnamese could absorb any new "appropriations."

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On the government side, however, President Thieu still shows every sign of intending to stay in office. Within the next week, he plans to deliver a speech which will make this intention clear and which will challenge the US Congress to make a clear decision on future support to Saigon. Thieu reportedly intends to deny that he is an obstacle to peace, but will reiterate that he will never agree to a communist take-over in the South. In this regard, Thieu will maintain that he would step down only if this would ensure quick and sufficient US assistance, and only if the US agrees to "react vigorously against communist aggression."

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Despite Thieu's tough public stand, South Vietnamese opposition elements apparently are still trying to work behind the scenes to form a new government that could lead to negotiations with the communists. Catholic opposition leader Tran Huu Thanh, retired general Duong Van "Big" Minh, former Senate chairman Nguyen Van Huyen, and Buddhist opposition leader Senator Vu Van Mau plan to issue a joint proclamation on April 23, demanding the immediate resignation of President Thieu and calling for the formation of a "national leadership council." The new council would be headed by the same four leaders, with a cabinet composed two thirds of "rightists"--presumably military officers and others closely identified with the present government--and one third of "leftists"--presumably elements represented by the four opposition leaders.

The hazy plan of action for the proposed new government appears to consist of immediate negotiations with the communists and establishment of the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord called for in the Paris Accords. Under the opposition scenario, the "leftist" faction of the government would concentrate on political competition with the communists within the Council, while the "rightist" faction would attempt to stabilize the military situation in what remains of South Vietnam's territory.

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CAMBODIA

The fate of journalists and other foreigners in Phnom Penh remains uncertain.

A Khmer communist message intercepted last Thursday indicated that all foreigners, except Chinese and Vietnamese, were being held together. The message said that the foreigners represented a "political problem" that "must be resolved properly."

Another communist message of the same day ordered the execution of government officials in the provincial capital of Kompong Cham. Press accounts of a Khmer communist broadcast referring to the beheading of senior government leaders in Phnom Penh have not been confirmed.

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MIDDLE EAST

Egyptian President Sadat begins a visit to Riyadh today that may include a rare meeting between Sadat and Syria's President Asad.

Sadat, who avoided Asad during King Faysal's funeral, told Ambassador Eilts on Saturday that Asad had requested the meeting. He said that earlier this month PLO chairman Arafat gave him a letter from Asad in which the Syrian leader "explicitly admitted" that Egypt can make peace or war without reference to Syria, but that Syria could make neither peace nor war in isolation from Egypt. The US embassy notes that while Arafat was in Egypt, he said publicly that the Arabs need Egypt to make war, although he added that Egypt needs the Arabs to make peace.

Sadat's interpretation of the Asad letter may be self-serving, but if the two leaders do meet, it will be because Asad, probably prompted by the Saudis, has taken the initiative. The Syrians repeatedly have complained about Sadat's failure to coordinate his political and diplomatic strategems with them and his penchant for unilateral action.

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Sadat, on the other hand, has been making no visible effort to ease his strained relations with Damascus [redacted]

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[redacted] He expects no improvement to come from the encounter. According to Ambassador Eilts, Sadat claimed to have told Arafat not to come to Riyadh because his presence would not contribute usefully to Syrian-Egyptian talks; presumably Sadat wants to avoid a Syrian-PLO effort to box him in on negotiating strategy as happened at the Rabat summit last October.

Also today, the Arab League foreign ministers convene a meeting in Cairo. The main item on their agenda is to select a site for the next Arab summit, tentatively set for late June.

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LATIN AMERICA

Secretary Kissinger's forthcoming trip to the region and the OAS General Assembly meetings next month are focusing Latin American attention on the state of inter-American affairs. At the same time, events in Indochina have provided impetus for a new round of Latin commentary on broad aspects of US policy.

While attitudes range from close identification with the US to antipathy, a common thread among the Latins is discomfort over the need to adjust to a new US view of the world. US positions on a variety of international topics have been interpreted as tougher toward the nonaligned and less benevolent toward friendly governments. A few Latin governments, including Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil, harbor some hope that reverses in Asia will turn US attention closer to home. Most seem to fear that current problems will make Washington less flexible in other areas.

Concern over reverberations from Indochina is highest in Latin countries that feel themselves embattled in an anti-communist struggle. Chile, for example, feels increasingly isolated in its effort to eliminate Allende's Marxist influence there. Taken together with the removal of Santiago from the Secretary's itinerary, events in Indochina have made Chile feel that its best option is to strengthen ties with neighbors in Latin America.

Uruguayans question the value of their long loyalty to and cooperation with the US because the Secretary plans to visit Buenos Aires, capital of an ostensibly nonaligned government, but not Montevideo. They view detente as an unwise accommodation to the communists and deplore Washington's change of heart about Cuba and Indochina.

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Panama's unique concern about the US mood has raised grave fear over the political fallout from the Indochina situation. Panamanians speculate that US public opinion, weary of setbacks, will not tolerate yielding the Canal Zone to Panama.

Elsewhere in the hemisphere, US attention to Asia has fortified the view that Latin America continues to have very low priority in US thinking. Few seem to expect that Secretary Kissinger's travels will restore the sense of rejuvenation that permeated inter-American events last spring.

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NOTES

Israeli Prime Minister Rabin focused on US-Israeli relations in a lengthy interview, apparently intended for both US and domestic audiences, that was published Friday in Israel's largest daily.

Rabin was plainly attempting to calm widespread fears in Israel that relations with the US have dangerously deteriorated. Defense Minister Peres, however, has openly labeled US-Israeli relations as in a state of "crisis," and Rabin, despite his efforts to play the matter down, is worried. Rabin said that Foreign Minister Allon will try to obtain a reading from Secretary Kissinger during their meeting today on the implications for Israel of Washington's policy assessment.

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Thailand has reportedly agreed to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea, the new Bangkok government's first move to improve relations with Asian communist regimes.

The Thai are deeply suspicious of the intentions of Hanoi and Peking in Southeast Asia, but they do not view Pyongyang as a potential threat to their security. Pyongyang views relations with Bangkok as another step forward in its diplomatic competition with Seoul, and as beneficial to Pyongyang's side of the Korean question at the UN.

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